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English news discourse from newsbooks to new media

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Suggestion for the running head: English news discourse from newsbooks to new media

This chapter discusses the long diachrony of English news discourse from seventeenth-century newsbooks to the twentieth century and the dawn of multimedia. We shall place news discourse in its context of sociocultural developments considering what might be diachronically constant and what prone to change. The data available for studies on news discourse as well as the potential for interdisciplinary study methods at various interfaces will be highlighted between sociolinguistics, journalism, semiotics, literary theory, critical discourse analysis, pragmatics and sociology.

Keywords: English news discourse, sociohistorical developments, diachrony, corpus analysis, metatextual analysis, multimodality, interdisciplinarity

1. Introduction

This collection of articles maps diachronic developments in English news discourse from the early newsbooks to the twentieth-century tabloid. The book highlights some of the major characteristics and trends of news discourse over time and serves as an overview of both news discourse and news practices. Moreover, it brings out the versatility of newspaper genres as it focuses on different types of news media, including its early forms, (illustrated) magazines and newspapers, and their varied contents. Several sub-genres are covered from more prototypical news to letters to the editor, sports reports, advertisements and comic strips. These studies also show how specific genres are modified

for new purposes. For example, advertisements can be turned into satire, or letters to the editor can become announcements of sports events. Although early newspapers relied overwhelmingly on text, the use of pictures gradually increased from the nineteenth century onwards, and some subsequent developments in multimodality are also included and illustrated in this book.

The volume is both historical and diachronic. All contributions view news discourse in a specific historical period or across time and reflect on linguistic, genre or discourse phenomena in relation to their sociohistorical contexts. The aim of the book is to demonstrate how news writing develops over three centuries. The articles increase our understanding of the field in relation to societal developments, changing ideologies and ideals of news writing, and varying needs and expectations of the newspaper producers and readers and even the role of news agents will be touched upon. The contributions introduce several interdisciplinary angles to news language. They are thus theoretically and methodologically relevant to a broad sociolinguistic perspective and provide multilayered and even multidisciplinary approaches to news discourse. The study of historical texts interprets and explains past events, but the present or even the future cannot be separated from them; different trends and processes carry on to the present moment and beyond. They have far-reaching effects, and a diachronic view is needed to achieve a profound understanding. For example, the beginnings of multimodal news discourse can be traced back at least to the late modern period, and audience engagement is by no means an invention of the digital age.

2. News discourse and sociocultural developments in a long diachrony

Specific sociohistorical conditions are favourable to certain types of linguistic phenomena emerging in news discourse. In the seventeenth century, for instance, the role of religious lexis was prominent in ideological debates due to the politicisation of the Church. The eighteenth century witnessed an

enormous increase in print advertisements, but consumerism was also parodied, and politeness became a leading concern in the educated society. The growing literacy of the nineteenth century worked in tandem with the development of the popular press addressing working-class audiences. New illustrated periodicals were published all over Europe to appeal to the wider public and even to semi-literate readers. The early twentieth century gave rise to an objective style in news writing promoted by news agencies, which were influential in creating and enforcing new conventions. In the course of the twentieth century, newspapers were followed by radio and television broadcasts, and then by new media; the former started to be called traditional media by the late 1990s and more recently the latter term has often been replaced by digital media, with social media as one of its major subtypes with various applications. So much so that a Google Scholar search on “media language” overwhelmingly produces hits on scholarly books and articles on language in the social and digital media since 2012.

It is clear that many types of sociocultural changes affecting news discourse have taken place over the last 400 years and the field is extremely diverse. In our survey, we shall focus on contextualizing news discourse to make sense and explain generic change and stability in spotlights to various manifestations in their sociohistorical contexts. News discourse is a form of public writing and as such it is an important way of accessing past societies and people, ideologies and practices. It is connected to them in many ways. The contexts of news discourse are complex and, consequently, news discourse itself comes in different shapes.

Popp (2006: 8) argues that mass media can be regarded as a linguistic market place that gives value and visibility to certain types of language. Media suggest frames in which discourse should be understood, but these frames may be incongruous with reality or represent a partial reality only. In other words, news discourse is a practice that does not simply reflect facts and reality but constructs them (Fowler 1991/2007: 2). For Popp (2006), linguistic transactions take place on several levels:

within the content of a text, between the audience and the text, and beyond the individual text, between texts categorized together according to some common principle.

We can approach the contents of this book from several angles, too. The articles in the first section of the book, “Changing or maintaining conventions”, deal with genre conventions and practices from the seventeenth century onwards. Such conventions make texts readily identifiable as members of a genre and writers can draw on existing texts and their characteristics for the creation of new texts. Conventions are born out of the use of discourse communities and created in response to prevailing sociohistorical circumstances. For example, the possible conventions that early advertisers could use and experiment with were technically far more limited than the present-day ones (Brownlee). Conventions are also bent and manipulated for new purposes as Sklar & Taavitsainen show in their analysis of an eighteenth-century mock advertisement.

Understanding individual texts from the modern perspective often requires highly contextualized readings that compare the text with other contemporary texts and look for meaning in contemporary social debates and current events. Even so, the full significance of such texts may escape our understanding without explication. However, change is not the only option: Wang’s analysis shows relative stability over time from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth century in recurrent word combinations in news discourse. In this case the explanation may lie in the overall stability of the purpose and content of news discourse, which has always been essentially about who, what, when, where, why and how.

The second section of the book highlights the role of widening readerships in changing conventions. Genre developments can be attributed to the audiences as genres are created for the needs of discourse communities (Taavitsainen 2012: 98). Increasing literacy in its various forms brought new readers to newspapers in the nineteenth century and gave rise to new modalities. Illustrations started to be used as they appealed to all kinds of audiences, not only to the working class but also to those who could not dedicate so much time to reading. But even earlier printers started to

make deliberate choices about which visual features to use and how – not only to adorn the text but to guide their readers in the reading process. For instance, eighteenth-century advertisements already employed a variety of typographic strategies to draw readers’ attention. They ranged from the frequently used abbreviation “N.B.” (often emphasized in bold type or placed in the margin), to little cuts and figures like pointing fingers (Brownlee 2012: 39). In the nineteenth century publishing houses already possessed better technology: illustrations were engraved into wooden blocks to create sketches or maps, and photographs were added to the repertoire towards the latter part of the century. Such additions made texts more approachable and more pleasant to read than the earlier densely printed pages. The nineteenth century was marked by armed conflicts as well as a general curiosity of new destinations and countries. Such topics could easily be turned into illustrations. They also fulfilled an important function of disseminating and protecting cultural and social heritage, characteristic of the Romantic era and the Victorian society (Sousa et al.).

The third section of the book, “New practices”, looks beyond individual texts in the sense that they are placed in specific cultural contexts in the wider social world in which they were used, and their significance and characteristics are interpreted against that background. Stenvall’s article for example highlights the role of the news agencies in news production and in the development of objective style in the turn of the twentieth century. Ryan’s diachronic study of an American-Italian newspaper places changes in the use of Italian in the context of changing identities of Italian immigrants and Ermida views the use and development of a new mode of comic strips in relation to social issues in the United States.

3. Data in studies on historical news discourse

In addition to original paper copies or microfilms in archives, news discourse can now be accessed through electronic newspaper databases and corpora. Online sources provide facsimiles in the form of pdf's, e.g. in *The Times Digital Archive* (1785–2010), covering nearly 70,000 issues and more than 11 million articles. The *British Newspaper Archive* (1800–1950) consisting of The British Library's newspaper collections contains most of the runs of newspapers published in the UK since 1800 and new material is being digitized from 1900 up to the 1950s (see Claridge 2010). The coverage for American English includes, for example, *The Corpus of Historical American English*, COHA (1810–2009), which consists of 400 million words, of which newspapers make up 40 million words. The *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, COCA, boasts a total of 520 million words (1990–2010), of which a sub-corpus dedicated to newspapers comprises 81 million words.

By the side of these large online databases and corpora, smaller structured corpora of text-format files have been compiled. The *Zurich English Newspaper Corpus* or ZEN (1661–1791) covers a variety of early English with 349 issues containing 1.6 million words, both in text-only version and XML version (see Fries 2012). *Rostock Newspaper Corpus* (1700–2000) comprises British news reports represented by 10,000 word samples with a total corpus size of 600,000 words (see also Bös 2012, Brownlees 2012, Facchinetti 2012). The nature of the data sources allows for different research questions to be explored. Pdf's of original newspaper pages enable detailed explorations of original layout and multimodal features (e.g. Brownlees, Sousa et al., Ermida). Electronic text corpora, on the other hand, can be used to look for language change and linguistic patterns in masses of text (Wang).

4. Methodologies and interfaces

The variety of research methods employed in the contributions of this volume is large, ranging from qualitative discourse analysis to statistical assessment, but all the articles aim at understanding and

explaining news practices in relevant sociohistorical contexts. Several different linguistic frameworks are adopted for this purpose including (at least) sociolinguistic, discourse analytic, pragmatic and multimodal approaches. We can examine how broader societal developments influence language use and vice versa, and we end up with rich interpretations of language practices in a given context.

Corpus linguistic methodology provides an array of different applications that are employed in various forms as even qualitative methods can use corpus evidence for their arguments. Corpus-assisted discourse studies relying on lexical searches are well represented. The most typical applications in this volume are KWIC (keyword-in-context) concordances, keyword analysis, collocation analysis and wordlists.

The range of linguistic phenomena under study varies from more specifically defined lexical items (Cecconi), pronouns (Claridge) and phraseological patterns (Wang) to broader and fuzzier discourse phenomena like codeswitching (Ryan), image (Brownlees, Ermida, Sousa et al.), metadiscursive elements (Bös), evaluative language (Nevala, Stenvall) and intertextual or interdiscursive styles (Chovanec, Conboy, Sklar & Taavitsainen). Thus the coverage is wide and shows how diverse the scope of news language analysis has become.

We have grouped the articles in this volume into three topic areas. The first one on “Changing and maintaining conventions” contains five articles that deal with the early days of newspaper production when textual practices were formed. Methods of pragmatics are employed in a number of articles. The first contribution in the volume by **Bös** examines identity construction and negotiation in prefatory metadiscourse in first editions of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century London newspapers to find out how newsmakers saw their own publications and to uncover journalistic ideals and publication strategies. With the help of word lists and keyword analysis complemented by qualitative analysis, different strategies emerge from the data, e.g., positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation as a means to influence readers’ attitudes.

Historical sociolinguistics or, more specifically, a macro sociolinguistic framework is applied to trace the relationship between newspaper language and ideology in **Cecconi's** corpus-assisted study on two English Civil War newsbooks, the Royalist *Mercurius Aulicus* and the Parliamentary *Mercurius Britanicus*, from the years of 1643 and 1644. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches are used. The first one to provide the framework of the broad societal context and current ideologies to be used for the interpretation of language practices, and the second one to identify recurring patterns of religious lexis. The analysis shows how controversial religious lexis like *Pope*, *Popery* and *Common Prayer* were used to construct the two ideologies and communities.

Brownlees analyses attention value and selling power in eighteenth-century advertisements published in the *Newcastle Courant* with methodology proposed by Leech (1966) and Gotti (2005). His analysis of contemporary comments by Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Henry Fielding and Samuel Johnson shows that both concepts were well understood at the time. The analysis of the advertisements then shows that some of the conventions noted by these commentators were observed, but, for example, the use of Latin and Latinate words in the provincial newspaper were seldom found.

In **Sklar & Taavitsainen** the study of irony and sarcasm, parody and satire as well as genre characteristics are topics at the interface between language and literature. Accordingly, the model of analysis consists of literary analysis complemented by a discourse pragmatic method to examine the expectations of readers at the time as well as the rhetorical style of an advertisement published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1755. The approach could also be called a corpus-informed philological and historical pragmatic approach with emphasis on (historical) literary criticism.

A few contributions are truly diachronic in that they follow the development of a specific linguistic phenomenon over time. We learn about the development of a linguistic feature over a long period in **Wang's** study on four-word lexical bundles from 1784 to 1983 in *The Times*. In this study the diachronic developments mostly pinpoint to the functional stability in linguistic features of the

genre of reports, irrespective of the time period. Newspapers use similar word strings to refer to places, people and events over long periods.

The second section entitled “Widening audiences” comprises five contributions dealing with the consequences of increasing literacy and newspaper production especially in the nineteenth century. Discourse analysis in a sociohistorical frame is applied in **Conboy’s** article to study audience engagement as a new journalistic practice. The development of the popular newspaper *Daily Mirror* into a tabloid is described from a journalistic angle with special attention paid to the process of attaining a wider readership in the British Press from the mid-nineteenth century into the 1930s (see also Bös 2012). The data shows that the *Daily Mirror* developed new means of soliciting content from the readers and interacting with them.

Claridge assesses the construction of social groups and ideologies in the radical *Poor Man’s Guardian* with rhetorical analysis. She focuses on the linguistic realisations of the texts and their sociohistorical circumstances and discusses audience expectations in detail. The results show how the “enemy” is kept at a distance with third-person pronouns, but the authorial “we” of the paper is not fully aligning with its readers either, as the working classes are also in need of education by the journalists.

Sousa et al. use a discourse analytic approach to compare two periodicals, the Portuguese *O Panorama* and the English *Penny Magazine*. *O Panorama* was modeled on *The Penny Magazine*, and to understand how and why this was carried out, the societal and cultural contexts of both countries are explored. In order to reveal meanings on the sentence level as well as beyond, on discourse and genre levels, the authors complement the analysis of sentence level linguistic features with semiotics and claim that images provide another mode for presenting information in illustrated magazines that makes the reading experience more entertaining. Furthermore, the combined effect creates affective involvement to the subject matter, which is another feature that attracts readers.

Chovanec demonstrates how letters to the editor in *The Times* served as sports announcements and compares different kinds of sports announcements in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This period saw a variety of sports-related genres in newspapers and the conventions and functions of these emerging new genres are scrutinized in the article. Chovanec maps the early stages of the development that has led to a variety of genres, which are not always compatible with each other, in present-day newspapers (Conboy 2007: 8).

Topics such as sport and crime attracted new audiences, and **Nevala** examines the terms used to refer to the infamous Jack the Ripper murders. Her data include news stories on the Ripper murders, published in British newspapers in 1888, but she argues that diachronic shifts in discourse can be seen in the coverage of the murders even in this short period of time. The style changed from matter-of-fact reporting to shocking sensations with macabre descriptions and an overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the murderer; this shift is likely to reflect the tastes of the audience.

The final section with four articles focuses on “New practices” that have emerged in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. **Stenvall**’s analysis shows how political news gradually developed into present-day reporting practices, as earlier narrative discourse gives way to more objective writing in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century news agency reports. News stories of the Siedlce Pogrom in 1906 are explored with a critical discourse analytic method to uncover different styles of reporting. Stenvall uses the appraisal framework of systemic functional linguistics (Martin & White 2005) to study evaluation and journalists’ attitudes in the stories attributed to the news agencies AP (Associated Press) and Reuters. The theory is complemented by a taxonomy for examining journalists’ stance on the reported emotions. In the modern world, newsmakers need to assess readers’ interests to offer the types of news that would be of interest to the public in the highly competitive news media market (Conboy 2007).

Ryan traces the emergence of Italian-American identity in *La Gazzetta del Massachusetts*. He looks at the way in which the newspaper can be used to construct identity by selecting three

variables for analysis: format, content and language. The results indicate that all the three variables show a gradual shift towards American style news on American topics, while the role of the Italian language and cultural features diminishes.

Some studies provide models for qualitative analyses to be applied to future studies and developed further. **Ermida** introduces a method for assessing multimodality in comic strips. In addition to more traditional linguistic analysis consisting of the analysis of semantic oppositions, the method combines elements from semiotics and visual rhetoric to study “visual language”. Pragmatic discourse analysis is combined with visual rhetorics of three different components that can be described as structural, sociological and semantic. The method provides a novel model for analysing the complex interplay of word and image. The goal of comics is often to achieve a humorous effect, but Ermida’s material shows that the model can, for example, uncover social criticism as well. In comic strips the number of frames, the use of speech balloons, the overall portrayal of events and the focus of text are often as crucial as the verbal expressions.

Recent developments in the field show that a shift of focus on multimodality has replaced semantic analysis with semiotics and texts are now studied as “ethno-texts”, taking into account the varied social identities and networks of people within the family, profession as well as the ethnocultural group (Facchinetti 2012: 176–180). The speed of development and change within mass media has brought about a diversification of news channels with traditional formats co-existing with new ones, merging together and breaking into smaller units. It has also blurred the distinction between newsmakers and consumers as well as what is considered public or private (Jucker & Taavitsainen 2013: 183–199).

5. Concluding remarks

In our chapter we hope to have shown the versatile nature of historical news discourse and we have outlined pertinent research questions rising out of the data. We began our journey from seventeenth-century newsbooks advancing through centuries of news writing up to the present. The term diachronic acted as a point of departure; perhaps the plural diachronies would be more appropriate to describe the range of material and the research questions in the contributions. The term historical was also introduced as a central concept. It does not, however, limit the scope of analysis to historical material only, albeit we feel that understanding historical developments is crucial for the study of present-day data. The methods of analysis are common to both historical and modern data.

The production of news discourse displays phenomena that have increased in complexity with time: this feature calls for new methodologies and tools for analysis. Data sources need attention, too, and we would like to advocate for more user-friendly electronic corpora, as the present historical archives accessible to researchers mostly give texts in pdf format that require manual work to render them suitable for digital corpus linguistic searches and analyses. At the time when news is changing with unprecedented speed and becoming more and more dynamic, multimodal and scattered, novel and fresh approaches are needed to study these processes. Interdisciplinary methods, as applied in many of the articles of our volume, provide one solution to the problem. The present collection of articles shows how fruitful this angle can be, especially if combined with sociohistorical anchoring of texts. Multiple methods and points of view help to highlight the subtleties of meaning-making mechanisms throughout the centuries with their changing language manifestations and variations of style, reflecting the widening audiences and their tastes and needs.

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